

AMERICA IN VIETNAM

STATINTL

A political analysis delivered by Buddhists, Catholics and South Vietnamese intellectuals in July, 1965 to visiting American clergymen in Saigon.

According to the explanations given by the governments of Washington and Saigon regarding the increasingly direct and massive participation of American troops in the war, the United States is merely coming to the rescue of an allied country which has expressly requested this aid in order to repel an invasion of communist troops from the North. In so doing, the U.S. states that it is contributing to the defense of the entire free world against communist subversion.

This thesis is not new. It was used by the French government from 1948 on to justify the presence of its troops in Indochina. The difference is that the French thesis in its day served to mask a war of reconquest, while the American thesis now appears to express the sincere intention of the U.S.: to help South Vietnam maintain its independence in the face of communist invasion.

However, besides the fact that it does not correspond to reality, this thesis has the disadvantage of making the war in South Vietnam absolutely incomprehensible. It may well be a fact that officers, soldiers, and arms have been sent from the North, or that the National Liberation Front in its broad outlines follows the orders of Hanoi. But it is not true that this war has its origins or its driving force in an "invasion" committed by Northern communists.

If it were true, then it would be impossible to understand how an invading force of such modest proportions, operating a thousand miles from its bases, without any modern means of supply, supported only by local guerrilla groups, could have so long resisted the powerful forces at the command of the U.S. and of Saigon: 600,000 men in the national army (ARVN); 100,000 men in the American Expeditionary Corps; a large portion of the Seventh Fleet and of American air power, plus supporting units from other nations such as South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand.

The massive American bombardment of North Vietnam, carried on for many months November / December

for the purpose of "cutting the supply lines" has apparently not attained the hoped-for result: the zones controlled by the Saigon government continue to shrink and to become isolated from one another. Unless one admits that the communist army is composed of supermen, such success surpasses all understanding.

In the long run, therefore, if the United States continues as at present, it is playing a losing game. For even if it pushed escalation to its extreme limits (invasion of the north, bombardment of China, etc.) the communists would take up the challenge and enter into a second war like Korea or Indochina. It seems that the most probable outcome will be a war of the Indochina type; that is, a long process of rotting, with the total eviction of the United States from this part of the world at the end.

REVOLT IS SOUTHERN

We must therefore invert the American thesis and consider the "invasion" from the North as an action in support of a popular movement born in the South itself. It may be that the NLF was established in 1960 on Hanoi's initiative, but it could never have grown so rapidly in strength without the active or passive support of a large part of the peasant population in the South.

This support has often been ascribed to "terrorism" used by the communists to make the people obey. Certainly there is terrorism, but not only on one side: the Saigon police and army, especially during the Diem period, was in no way inferior to the communists in this regard, and even enjoyed a crushing superiority of weapons and the cover of legality. If it was a question of terrorism, why didn't the population support Diem?

The evidence is clear: popular sympathy, even in a city as Americanized as Saigon, does not favor the government. On the contrary, the population is lending an increasingly attentive ear to the propaganda of the NLF. This is because now, as in 1945 (when the

first Indochina War began), the communists have been able to make the population's grievances their own, and thus to capture the force of popular discontent and channel it to their benefit.

For ten years the population of South Vietnam has been discontented. From 1945 to 1954, the people participated actively in the resistance against the French. When the French left, people thought that they finally had the right to expect that their most legitimate aspirations would begin to be fulfilled: independence, national unity, social justice, and democracy. These aspirations cannot be satisfied by grandiloquent phrases or by empty slogans. Throughout the painful years of war, they have been more and more clearly understood as legitimate, just demands, as the essential aim of the struggle, and as the very meaning of all the sufferings endured.

AMERICA'S ERROR

One must conclude that the fundamental error of the U.S. is exactly the same as that of the French in 1945: ignorance or contempt for the aspirations of the people, together with simplistic, negative anticommunism.

This error has led the U.S.—here as elsewhere—to seek out and support a “strong man” who would use all military means to exterminate the communists. And when these military measures turned out badly, the U.S. has stepped them up or found other military means.

To sum up, during the ten years that this country has lived under the influence and with the aid of the United States, not one of the aspirations for the sake of which the people fought against colonialism has been satisfied: Vietnam has neither independence nor unity nor justice nor democracy. The Diem regime, a bloody and inefficient dictatorship, was the Achilles' heel of the United States; the U.S. supported it at all costs against all opposition until the U.S. itself had to overthrow it. By then it was too late.

In reality, for the people of the underdeveloped countries communism is not a problem. It is indeed the solution of their problems: real independence, real justice, real democracy. This solution may turn out to be inhumane, fallacious, or deceptive in the long run. But up to the present it is the only solution which has truly aided an underdeveloped country in rapidly resolving its problems, and done so with dignity. The rich nations will never sufficiently understand how much the poor nations need dignity. The enormous prestige

that Communist China enjoys among the Afro-Asian countries is due not so much to its rapid economic progress as to the dignity which it has maintained in realizing this progress.

ANTI-POLICY

Faced with these popular demands, what has been the policy of the United States and of the Saigon governments?

This policy is composed of three “anti’s”: antifeudalism, anticolonialism, and anticommunism. In reality only the last of these three has been applied; and it was applied in a manner as brutal as it was blind.

The Diem regime began with a merciless witch-hunt: tens of thousands of former resistance fighters were branded as “Vietcong” and thrown into prison or concentration camps. Families with relatives who had fled to the North were subjected to a thousand harassments. But in the eyes of the people, Vietnam owed its independence to precisely these resistance fighters. The majority of them, by the way, were neither communists nor sympathizers; their only wish was to restore the nation's normal life after long years of hard struggle. Diem's McCarthy-style anti-communism left them no choice but to fight in order to survive. At first they waited patiently for the 1956 reunification elections provided by the Geneva Agreements. Only after 1956, when it was clear that the Geneva Agreements would not be implemented, did the opposition begin to organize itself. The official policy of anticommunism had the effect of pushing the men whom the population respected most and who were most capable—the resistance fighters—into the arms of the communists. The latter are only too happy to profit from this; can one blame them?

The more organized the opposition became, the more blind and brutal became the government's reactions; all those who did not think exactly like the government were accused of being communists. Thus, little by little, the opposition spread its influence to all strata of the population, even to the wealthiest elements. The government's narrow, misconceived anticommunism has played into the hands of the communists.

The people of South Vietnam are not by nature procommunist. However, they have no reason to hate communism—they know it neither as a doctrine nor as a regime. The only communists the people know are the leaders of the resistance, and it justly considers these men patriots. The official propa-

ganda line which brands the communists as traitors who sell their country to Russia or China has no effect whatsoever on a population which fought for nine years under the direction of these same leaders.

Of course, communism—as doctrine or as regime—goes counter to national tradition and to the immediate interests of a population which is mainly composed of profoundly religious, land-starved peasants. But anticommunism could strike roots in the people only if it were really accompanied by antifeudalism and anticolonialism. That is to say, anti-communism could be effective only if it were accompanied by profound changes, including the replacement of the old social structure with a new one capable of satisfying the people's aspirations for justice and freedom. But nothing has been done in this area. In truth, South Vietnamese society after ten years of independence remains colonial and feudal: the same mandarins rule as always, the rich have gotten richer and the poor are as poor now as ever.

Admittedly, American foreign aid has been generous, and has prevented South Vietnam from collapsing into economic and financial chaos. But this aid has some grave defects:

- Economic aid is given as "defense support."

- It has created a rapacious and parasitical class of *nouveaux riches* whose opulent style of life is a permanent insult to one's sense of justice.

- It has maintained South Vietnam in a condition of permanent dependence, instead of helping the country to construct a really healthy, viable economy.

NOTHING BETWEEN TWO INFINITIES

What is the present situation in South Vietnam? There are two realities, and only two: the United States and the National Liberation Front. The nationalist government, which during the time of Diem was still able to preserve a shadow of reality, is losing even this shadow and has become, in the words of Pascal, "a nothing between two infinities."

The fundamental flaw of American policy is that the more massively and directly it intervenes in this war, the more it destroys the reality of the government on whose behalf it is intervening. And in consequence, the more it destroys the legitimacy of its intervention.

For two years the painful spectacle of the South Vietnamese political scene has become the despair of everyone, and particularly of youth. Everyone suspects, rightly or wrongly, November / December

that the United States pulls the strings behind the scene. The nationalist regime has become a more and more transparent shadow of the American presence. This situation is extremely dangerous. Why? Because besides the fact that it substantiates communist accusations of American imperialism, it puts honest and sincere nationalists in a most difficult position. To satisfy their conscience, they are tempted either to withdraw from politics altogether or to join the National Liberation Front. Even merchants and businessmen, who have always been able to safeguard their interests throughout the turmoil, will be more and more tempted to "invest" in the NLF.

The decomposition of the nationalist regime for the past two years has come to the point where every person who possesses a piece of power thinks himself a little aristocrat. Nobody obeys anyone else and everyone is ready to stab his neighbor in the back in order to preserve or increase his little piece of power—power which is admittedly illusory, but ever so profitable. On top of these little lords, a handful of military men wields all the power with no other control than their consciences.

Faced with such a situation, the nationalists are strongly tempted to find a scapegoat. The communists are ready-made for the role. But, since this poor goat is beginning to wear out after ten years of hard service, one begins, in whispers, to seize on another scapegoat: the

IF ONLY THE COMMUNISTS WOULD LET US BE GOOD

"We will continue as best we can to help the good people of South Vietnam enrich the condition of their life, to feed the hungry, and to tend the sick, and teach the young, and shelter the homeless..."

— Lyndon Johnson, White House Press Conference, July 28, 1965.

"Senator Stephen M. Young, Democrat of Ohio (and member of the Senate Armed Services Committee), said today that he had learned that the Central Intelligence Agency hired persons to disguise as Vietcong and discredit Communists in Vietnam by committing atrocities.... Mr. Young, who recently returned from Vietnam, had at first said to newsmen that a CIA man told him the CIA hired South Vietnamese who dressed as Vietcong then committed such acts as killing men and raping women.... Tonight, Senator Young denied having said that the report came from a CIA man, but he said that he got it from an American military officer."

— N. Y. Times, 10/20/65

Americans. Here at last is a case of opposites joined together: the communists and the Americans together bear all the sins of the world. The Americans are not popular, of course, but where they are least popular is where they have given the most money and the most support: in government circles. The less reality the government has, the more anti-American it becomes. Having become a shadow, the government revenges itself in the salons of Saigon with loud anti-Americanism. But one must recognize this is the only way that the shadow can look real.

That is a hard truth, but it must be told to the American people. Day after day they are destroying this country which they are risking their lives to defend. What is there left to defend? The nationalist regime? We have seen it evaporate like the smoke after an American bombardment. Liberty? For nine years under American patronage, the people of South Vietnam have supported Diem's "personalist" liberty in jail, in "prosperity zones," in strategic hamlets. They have had enough. The "Free World"? This is perhaps an important reason for the Americans, and a cause for which Americans can die. But the population of South Vietnam is profoundly wary of the "Free World." For nearly one hundred years, this so-called Free World has brought Vietnam nothing but humiliation, servitude, exploitation, disasters, and wars.

That is the problem. What does the United States want in this part of the world? Simply

to hold on to a strategically valuable territory, to gain useful experience in counterinsurgency warfare? Or does the United States really want to help the Vietnamese people solve their problems? If the first is true, then this war is an exclusively American affair, and sooner or later the U.S. will have all Vietnamese against it, as the French did in the first Indochina war. If the second supposition is true, then the U.S. must undertake a drastic revision of its policy—not only in Vietnam but also in other parts of the world where its influence extends—in order to really help the Vietnamese people end this war. For this war is Vietnam's greatest problem; its existence is at stake.



KOREA—THEN AND NOW

Did we really end the war in Korea?

by Leonard Liggio

The war in Korea anteceded the present one in Vietnam in ways far more telling than mere chronology. It was in late June 1950 when President Truman dispatched United States air and naval forces to aid the American trained and equipped South Korean Army and directed the U.S. Seventh Fleet to protect Chiang Kai-shek in his Taiwan refuge. This marked the beginning of outright United States military presence in Vietnam too, for the same order also committed this country to heavy support,

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beginning with U.S. aircraft, of the French effort to eliminate the Vietminh government in Vietnam. The question is why did the United States, thoroughly embroiled in Korea, want to see to it that France won her war next door?

The answer to the question lies in certain changes in the United States' attitude toward China, changes directly created by the Korean war. Initially, the U.S. had adopted a wait-and-see attitude toward the new government on the mainland of China. The forecast was that time could dissolve the anti-U.S. sentiments understandable in the new Chinese leaders whom we had just been actively opposing in the civil war against Chiang. Time, furthermore,